Huzza for the West!

"Huzza for the West!" - countless men and women seeking a better way of life on the frontier have responded to the promise contained in those words. For, the frontier offered hope of better things to come. It was a time when the western world was harvesting the fruits of a prosperity created by the age of discovery and exploration; when the proportion of land and valuable metal to the number of people stood high above its level prior to 1500; and when there were more good things for common folk to enjoy than had been the case long before the discovery of the New World. Of course, the change in things did not mean that there were no longer poor people on the earth or that everyone owned all the land or all the material goods that he wanted. But it did mean that for individuals driven by ambition, hard work, sweetened by good luck, they just might become comparatively well off. From the advantage of hindsight, it is not difficult to apply this principle both to the founders of Neenah and Menasha as well as to the settlers who followed them.

Illustrating the mood of hustle and bustle coming to life in frontier Wisconsin is the following statement from a letter addressed by "a respectable citizen" to the Green Bay Intelligencer in 1834. Admittedly, the letter focused on Green Bay, but might not its sentiment be applied to the Fox River Valley, the theater of expansion to the south? The "respectable citizen" wrote:

There are few places within my knowledge where I should think a man of activity and industry would be better rewarded for his exertions than here. The money thrown into circulation by the Army, the Indian Department, and some public works going on here gives an impetus to business that puts the abilities of all into constant requisition.

Moreover, the citizen regarded transportation from Ogdensburg, New York, (whence he had come) to Green Bay as being neither costly nor time consuming. All that stood between a family of six and their belongings on one hand and
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Green Bay on the other was a twenty-day sail by lake schooner and $100 to pay their fare.

Various agencies urged community development on the Wisconsin frontier. One handy tool for transmitting the message of earnest effort to build up the region was the infant newspaper press containing informative editorials along with letters addressed either to the editor or to the public. In addition, there were lively reports about crop yields, boat landings and departures, business activities, and land transactions. Indeed, when Andrew Jackson issued a proclamation announcing the opening of "A great portion of the Public Lands in Wisconsin" to sale in 1835, the Green Bay Intelligencer promised to spare no pains "to present the characteristics of this interesting portion of the west" and to keep people "at the east" fully informed about what was going on. Colonel Samuel C. Stambaugh's descriptive survey of the Menominee Cession of 1831 was another "document of interest"; in fact, the Intelligencer deemed it to be worth printing twice. To sum up, these sources reflected the steps leading to frontier settlement - encouragement of population growth by advertising regional attractions and calling for better roads and bridges while improving existing waterways. Added to such promptings was the pacification of the frontier by elbowing the Indian from the white man's path; or, as in the case of the Menominees, attempting to provide selected adults with vocational training while making church-sponsored education available for young Menominees.

There were certain inducements which the Far West of the 1830's held for migrants - either Europeans or Americans - who hoped to better their lives by pulling up stakes and heading say, in connection with the story of Neenah and Menasha, for the Fox River Valley. For example, take the land policy of the United States which permitted the purchase of eighty acres from the public domain for only $100; or, as the Green Bay Intelligencer enthusiastically observed, 160 acres for only $200. The government's generosity was further evident in its preemption policy which gave a squatter first chance to buy at the minimum price the land he had been occupying when it went up for sale. Of this, the Intelligencer remarked:

*Hundreds of families not possessed of the means of purchasing, may settle on the public lands, cultivate them and live unmolested, till able from the proceeds to purchase. Those who have a small capital to commence with have peculiar advantages. Moreover, who among migrating farmer-folk could easily resist the persuasions of journalistic*
From the Buffalo Journal, Oct. 12, 1831.
Letter to the Editor, dated—
Green Bay, Sept 5, 1831.

Dear Sir—Col. Stambaugh has been appointed the agent of the United States, to examine the country ceded by the Menomonees to the government in the month of February last. In one of his excursions I had the pleasure of accompanying him by his invitation; a brief account of which I take the liberty of giving you.

A tract containing 500,000 acres of land is offered by the treaty to the New York Indians, for their use. We embarked in a birch canoe, and proceeded up Fox River, 8 miles from Green Bay, when we landed on this tract, not far from its southern boundary. After ascending a bank which rises gradually from the river, one hundred feet, we walked back through an "oak-opening" about one mile, to an extensive natural meadow, which lies parallel to the river, and upon the same level with the top of the bank. These meadows are of the richest soil, and must be immediately of great value to those Indians who select their farms along the border of this stream. The timber in their vicinity is white, black, and yellow oaks, and the valley of the Fox River, in which "the spiral tops of the pine" may be seen rising above the lighter foliage of the beech and sugar maple.

The main roads, leading from Green Bay to Chicago, to the Wisconsin Portage, to the Lead Mines, and to Galena, will it is presumed pass this point and it is on this account, a very eligible and desirable site, and will be among the first to attract the eye of the emigrant.

We walked along on the edge of the cliff, which we had ascended in an Indian path, about three miles, and began our descent to the water (Winnebago Lake) through another fissure which was from two to 4 feet in width, and one hundred feet in depth. The side of the mountain is covered with blocks of limestone, which may be used without any preparation.

From the point where we re-embarked in the canoe, the mountain recedes three or four miles from the shore of the Lake, between which is a valley, fifteen miles in length, of as fertile land as can be found in the United States. The timber in this valley is oak, hickory, butternut, maple, beech, basswood and elon.

This valley and mountain terminate to the south in a dry prairie, which is called the

Cass Plains. The plains contain 25,000 acres of rich land, free from underbrush upon which the farmer would not be required to bestow any expense in clearing for the plough.

On their western border, and on the shore of the Lake, is the Calumet village, occupied by Menomonees, who raise large quantities of corn. On the 25th day of August, they had, at this village, gathered their corn, and we saw at least 600 bushels braided in rows and swung upon poles to dry.

The plains extend to the Manistowee River, which is six miles distant from this village, and which runs north-easterly into Lake Michigan, and is navigated by the Indians with canoes. It is computed to be forty-five miles from Winnebago Lake to Lake Michigan.

At the Fond du Lac, we entered the mouth of a river. The water at the entrance is 8 feet in depth; but after passing the flat its ten feet. Then begin the prairies, which may be followed almost without interruption by timber, to the Mississippi river. They lie entirely around the head of the Lake; and in the east, they extend half way up a high ridge of land, six miles distant from this point, the annunciation of the site upon which the men to have their houses erected, according to a stipulation of the treaty. Their selection was a very judicious one, as the land which they are to occupy and cultivate in the vicinity, is rich, and may be easily tilled, being a mixture of loam and sand. The government has promised to assist them in their agricultural efforts, by placing farmers near them for a certain number of years.

After descending the river to the Lake, we followed the shore 20 miles to the outlet, at Busy's Island, and passing down the river with great rapidity, reached the Bay in the evening of the same day on which we left the Butte; having travelled that day 75 miles, and during our absence from this place more than 100 miles.

Yours, &c.

Eyewitness account of Stambaugh's travels through the Fox River Valley.
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columns describing a climate so favorable and a soil so rich that it would take only 'a small amount of labor' to improve a place to the level of agriculture in the 'middle states,' a farmstead where, happily, one's livestock could 'run upon the range, and be subsisted without expense a great part of the year'.

Nor did the Intelligencer ignore skilled mechanics when it called for all kinds of productive laborers to come west, particularly young men and persons belonging to the construction trades. Work was available "for any number", and in Wisconsin the rewards for their labor would be generous for mechanics would receive wages amounting to as much as $2.00 per day. And there was more to consider. The newspaper stated, "In a very few years they will, by steady and persevering industry amass a handsome property . . ." But on the other hand, the Intelligencer cautioned those same mechanics "not to expect to grow suddenly rich". It explained, "The great secret to the accumulation of property in . . . the 'West'" is "in the gradual rise of property by the advantageous application of manual labor". In other words, what a man accomplished was what counted in early Wisconsin.

This reasoning also related to the exercise of individual initiative within the framework of frontier democracy. In his new surroundings, the European migrant could make his mark without bowing to the old world scheme of state churches; nor did he have to pay obeisance to hereditary aristocracy fattening on his labor and that of his family. And, the American migrant could breathe more freely as he tapped the unexploited wealth of natural resources on the frontier. In short, the migrants of the period - whatever their origins - were free to share the ideals of strive and thrive in the attempt to profit from what the Far West of the time had to offer.

An event occurring in 1831 and having importance for the historical background of Neenah and Menasha was Colonel Samuel C. Stambaugh's negotiation of a treaty which provided for the Menominee Indians to cede a whopping 3,000,000 acres of their lands a portion of which would become a home for certain New York tribes with the remainder to go to the United States. The arrangement permitted the Menominees to reserve lands opposite to where Neenah and Menasha would stand some day. Moreover, the treaty authorized the establishment of a farming-milling-domestic arts program intended to school the tribe for a new way of living by "attaching them to comfortable homes". For, this was a time when some Americans regarded the achievement of peace and
quiet on the frontier as being more readily obtainable through civilizing - that is, educating and Christianizing - the native occupants of the land so as to assure the United States of "their friendliness if not . . . lasting gratitude".

The Stambaugh Treaty also assigned the islands of Green Bay and the lower Fox River to the United States; thus, the stipulation included the island historically called Four Legs Island after the Winnebago chief and situated between the channels formed where Lake Winnebago flows into the Fox. During the treaty ratification process, the Menominees tried to present the island to politician James Duane Doty whom they thought an especial friend, but the United States Senate said, "No". Yet despite this setback, Doty was destined to become the island's best known resident, and as will shortly be seen, he appears to have given the place his name.

Although Colonel Stambaugh had succeeded in negotiating the treaty with the Menominees, a political snarl cost him his job as Indian Agent at Green Bay. Nevertheless, Secretary of War John Eaton instructed the officer to "traverse" the lands awarded to the New York Indians and to make besides, "a partial examination of the lands ceded between Lake Michigan and Green Bay". Stambaugh complied, and the result was his "document of interest" which included comments on what was to be known as "Doty's Island". True, the Colonel did not mention the island by that name, but someone who was the Colonel's guest did; that someone was none other than James Duane Doty then hopeful of acquiring the island by the treaty route. In any case, Stambaugh wrote:

This island is about a mile in length, and contains about 400 acres of land, which, for depth and richness of soil is equal to any in the Territory of Michigan. It is covered with a heavy growth of hickory, oak, butternut, and bass wood, with the exception of about 40 acres at the upper end of the island which is a fine clear field, ready for the plough.

Colonel Stambaugh reported on something else. He noted the presence of "strong rapids on both sides of the island" and in addition, many "excellent sites for any kind of water work". Perhaps as good a testimonial as any to the soundness of the Colonel's estimate were tabulations appearing in a Wisconsin Gazetteer of 1853 and listing no fewer than fifteen industrial concerns of various kinds in Menasha and another eight in Neenah with "an immense hydraulic power
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yet unoccupied". The Gazetteer further stated, "Some think that time will ultimately connect the two . . . , including the large island between, in one large city, possessing advantages of location and water power rarely equalled".

What kind of countryside could the emigrant expect to discover when he arrived at the future site of Neenah and Menasha? For reply, take the assertion of the Green Bay Intelligencer: "The beauty of the country about the Winnebago Rapids, has been remarked by all travelers for its fertility, central and commanding position, and romantic scenery". This conviction persisted. In 1851, Captain Lauchlan B. MacKinnon, R. N., wrote, after strolling about on Doty's Island, that he thought "a more beautiful location . . . impossible". Adding a certain wonderment to the scene was a number of the mysterious earthworks built by native Americans at an unknown time in the past. The most outstanding of these was the Little Butte des Morts mound standing on the west bank of the Little Butte des Morts Lake; the geologist Increase A. Lapham recorded that eight others from "forty to fifty feet in diameter" stood near Menasha "in the southeast corner of section fourteen, township twenty, range seventeen," while an elongated mound "quite high at the end" stood in Menasha itself. A similar one stood on Doty's Island.

A significant testimonial to the desirability of the Winnebago Rapids locale occurred in 1833, when Michigan Territorial Governor George B. Porter decided to fix along the left channel of the river the place for the proposed educational venture for the Menominee. In early 1834, the Intelligencer announced that Governor Porter, acting as commissioner to implement the agreement, had chosen for the site of the undertaking "the beautiful point of land on the west side of Fox River, at the Winnebago Rapids". Viewing the Governor's selection as being "the most eligible that could have been found in the country," the newspaper noted the presence of "A large island in the rapids, . . . , called by some Hunt's Island - by others Doty's Island". In its opinion, the place had "been coveted by every person of judgment and enterprise" for it was "truly the most valuable piece of land in the cession".

Yet as promising as things seemed, the experimental program to assist the Menominee failed. The story of the venture will be told in a later chapter; but in any case on September 3, 1836, by the Treaty of the Cedars, the tribe handed over to the United States the land, buildings, and equipment associated with the undertaking. The transfer was only a part of a much larger cession.
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Much has been written concerning the reasons for the failure of the educational experiment with the Indians taking a goodly share of blame. It has been argued, for example, that they were not genuinely appreciative of the instructional help given them; that they did not adapt to the white men’s type of housing; and that the males thought manual labor to be demeaning. Nonetheless, it may be of interest to suggest that Brigadier General George M. Brooke, acting Indian agent, cited lack of effective leadership as a basic cause of unhappiness with the work being done at Winnebago Rapids. Following a visit there, Brooke wrote the Commissioner of Indian Affairs at Washington:

This forming [sic] business has been very injurious, . . . , instead of beneficial to the Indians. The whole establishment having no head directly, . . . , and every person, . . . , contending, for independence, of each other, has produced nothing else, but quarrel & disscomfort [sic] - . . . the place has become one of perfect intrigue, . . . , as the grandest political arena.

Even earlier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Elbert Herring had complained to Wisconsin Territorial Governor Henry Dodge that the distance between Green Bay and the farming operations made "it difficult to extend to them a proper personal supervision". To sum up, when the Green Bay Intelligencer wrote that the Menominee experimental farming scheme was about to end, it put the best possible face on the matter by observing that the arrangement "would have formed a colony as beneficial to the Indians, as creditable to the government".

However, the foregoing may be judged, the treaty of 1836 - along with Jackson's land sale proclamation of 1835 - did open the door more widely to those men "of judgment and enterprise" who had looked longingly toward Doty's Island and the mainland opposite. They could now step forward with plans to acquire and develop. From this perspective, the years 1835 and 1836 represent a turning point in the backgrounds of Neenah and Menasha. Of course, there remained the disposal of the buildings and equipment which had been part of the Menominee experiment; as will be seen, this would end in a twisty - but no less interesting - tale.

Because of Jackson's proclamation opening the public lands to sale, it seems proper to suggest that things began to move more rapidly in frontier Wisconsin. For example, the Green Bay Intelligencer prophesied in December, 1835, that "ere another year has rolled by, a torrent of emigrants will have poured into this
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one of the finest portions of the Far West". Moreover, in a letter appearing in the Intelligencer of February 3, 1836, the Genesee (New York) Gazette asserted:

*The Wisconsin Territory is attracting the attention of emigrants and although it is but six months since the public lands were offered for sale, the tide... is so great that probably in 1840, the Territory of Wisconsin will be admitted into the Union.*

This was not all. In March, 1836, the Green Bay newspaper stated:

*The last twelve months have produced changes in Wisconsin which no eye could have foreseen. What the next will bring forth is yet to be known - but from the indications (numerous as summer flies,) we predict the story is scarce began [sic].*

For the purposes of the pages to follow, one part of the story to unfold will deal with events and changes occurring at the Winnebago Rapids and, of course, on Doty Island.

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Prof. Edward Noyes